United Nations A/AC.198/1999/8

General Assembly

Distr.: General
22 April 1999

Original: English

Committee on Information
Twenty-first session
3–14 May 1999
Substantive questions

Proposed medium-term plan for the period 2002–2005

Programme 23, Public information

Report of the Secretary-General*

I. Introduction

1. The medium-term plan constitutes the principal policy directive of the United Nations. It is a translation of legislative mandates into programmes and subprogrammes. Its objectives and strategies are derived from the policy orientations and goals set by intergovernmental organs. The medium-term plan serves as a framework for the formulation of the biennial programme budgets within the period covered by the plan.

2. Pursuant to the Regulations and Rules Governing Programme Planning, the Programme Aspects of the Budget, the Monitoring of the Implementation and the Methods of Evaluation, the programmes and subprogrammes of the proposed medium-term plan are to be reviewed by the relevant sectoral, functional and regional intergovernmental bodies prior to submission to the Committee for Programme and Coordination, the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and the General Assembly.

3. The draft programme on public information of the proposed medium-term plan for the period 2002–2005 is presented below for consideration by the Committee on Information. The views and recommendations of the Committee thereon will be taken into account when the Secretary-General finalizes his proposed medium-term plan to be submitted to the General Assembly at its fifty-fifth session, in 2000, through the Committee for Programme and Coordination and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions.

4. In section I of its resolution 53/207 of 18 December 1998, the General Assembly reiterated its request to the Secretary-General to take all appropriate measures, including ad hoc measures, and to submit proposals, through the Committee for Programme and Coordination, to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session, so as to enable the Main Committees of the General Assembly, as well as sectoral, functional and regional bodies, effectively to review the relevant portions of the medium-term plan or its revisions, with a view to facilitating their consideration by the Committee for Programme and Coordination and the Fifth Committee. The present report has been prepared for consideration by the Committee on Information in response to the General Assembly's request.

* This document is issued late owing to delayed submission by the originating department.

99-11628 (E) 040599

II. Overview of the medium-term plan for programme 23, Public information

5. The basic mission of the United Nations public information programme is to promote an informed public understanding of the activities of the Organization among the peoples of the world, as originally mandated by the General Assembly in resolution 13 (I) of 13 February 1946. Only by enhancing public awareness of the goals and ideals of the United Nations will the Organization be able to galvanize universal support for its objectives. In order to project an image of the Organization as an open and transparent public institution, the Secretary-General has emphasized the essential role of public information and communications as an integral part of the substantive programme of the United Nations and called for the development of a culture of communications throughout the Organization.

6. The Department of Public Information will continue to strengthen its cooperation with all parts of the United Nations system to design and implement public information and communications strategies for mandated priority issues. The various arms of the system will work together, for example, in a more news-centred, media-friendly multimedia operation providing information directly to foreign editors in all Member States. To reach this objective, the Department will also rely on the network of United Nations information centres, services and United Nations offices worldwide to effectively extend its outreach to national audiences.

7. New communications and information technologies available to the Department, including the World Wide Web, have already multiplied and speeded up its global outreach, enabling it to reach new and expanding audiences. United Nations information centres and services will continue to develop local language Web sites to meet the needs of local audiences, including the media, non-governmental organizations, youth, academic institutions, business and professional organizations, parliamentarians, government leaders and other parts of civil society. Technological developments and the needs of those audiences will help shape the form of the output of the Department. Cooperation and partnerships with redisseminators will be pursued at all levels, both at Headquarters and in the field.

8. The Department will continue to emphasize the cumulative advantages of planning and implementing integrated information strategies targeting key redisseminators. These include promotional activities and public services to highlight the activities of the Organization in priority areas, such as peace and security, economic and social development and human rights. With the new orientation of the public information and communications activities under the direction of the General Assembly and the Secretary-General, the Department expects to build greater popular support for the Organization worldwide.

III. Subprogramme 1. Promotional services

9. The Department will continue to highlight issues of priority concern to the international community in order to promote a positive public understanding of the work of the Organization and strong public support for its objectives. The subprogramme will be carried out by the Public Affairs Division and the United Nations information centres and services.

10. The major objective of the subprogramme is to promote an informed and positive public understanding of the activities of the United Nations and help build broad-based global support for the Organization's goals by highlighting the priority issues of concern to the international community. To that end, the focus of the subprogramme will be on highlighting the role of the Organization in furthering economic and social development, democracy and human rights, peace and security, as well as on promoting certain political mandates. In addition, the Department will focus on public information and communications programmes related to the series of major international conferences and special sessions of the General Assembly, to take place in the biennium 2000–2001 and thereafter. Emphasis will be placed on reflecting effectively and in a timely manner the activities, successes and performance of the Organization and the relevance of its work to the daily lives and concerns of people everywhere.

11. The second objective of the subprogramme is to continue to work closely with other substantive departments of the United Nations, offices, programmes, funds and specialized agencies, and to contribute to the ongoing development of a system-wide culture of communications, as called for by the Secretary-General. Strong partnerships at the Headquarters and field levels are essential to enable the Department to define the themes to be highlighted during the period of the medium-term plan and to coordinate the public information activities of the Organization with a view to presenting a unified image. A third and related objective of the subprogramme is to work closely with United Nations system partners to develop and implement system-wide thematic information campaigns on priority issues of concern to the international community. United Nations information centres will be responsible for the implementation of information programmes, taking into account regional and local interests.

12. The fourth objective of the subprogramme is to cultivate and strengthen partnerships with the Department's key constituencies, including the media, non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, professional and business organizations and other segments of civil society that are the targets of the Department's thematic information campaigns. A particular focus of such efforts must be media institutions, which are key and indispensable partners in projecting United Nations messages to a worldwide audience. At the same time, United Nations information centres, by virtue of their local presence, will strengthen and expand partnerships with civil society, including the business, academic and religious communities. The fifth objective is to produce timely and authoritative public information materials geared towards these key redisseminators, as well as for direct public consumption, and in response to media comments and instances of misinformation about the Organization.

13. The sixth objective of the subprogramme is to continue to develop the United Nations Web site and its capacity as a central communications medium and delivery vehicle for the Organization's outreach programmes in order to take full advantage of the scope and depth of reach that this medium provides. In addition to the enhancement of the language sites and the CyberSchoolBus — the United Nations educational site for young people — Web development will be made an integral part of the maintenance operation in order to ensure that it keeps pace with the latest technology. At the same time, the Department will, on a continuous basis, incorporate the latest technologies in the traditional media of print, radio, television and video to ensure broad outreach to all countries, regardless of their level of information technology development. At the field level, United Nations information centres and services will give high priority to making more information materials available in local languages, including local-language Web pages of United Nations information centres, where applicable.

14. The seventh objective will be to further enhance public interest in the work of the Organization through innovative educational outreach activities, training programmes for journalists, exhibitions, guided tours and symposia and conferences with media, non-governmental organizations and government partners.

IV. Subprogramme 2. Information services

15. The proliferation and growing reach and impact of the news media and the ongoing revolution in communications technology will significantly alter the manner in which the Department carries out this subprogramme in the period 2002–2005. The speed, efficiency and more favourable cost of the new communications technology, as well as the convergence under way of the principal media, will allow the United Nations to communicate instantaneously with the media worldwide. This in turn will influence the orientation, production methods and modes of dissemination of the information materials that the Department produces. The content of these materials will be reviewed regularly in the light of intergovernmental mandates. This subprogramme will be carried out by the News and Media Division and the United Nations information centres and services.

16. The continuing proliferation of news media worldwide will significantly increase the demand for information about the activities of the Organization. To ensure that the Department can meet this challenge, it will accelerate the ongoing drive to establish closer working links with media throughout the world and continue the ongoing reorientation of the Department's outputs so that they are much more closely aligned with its evolving needs and practices. One means of accomplishing this will be to disseminate, at the pace dictated by media deadlines, more live footage and quickly edited raw materials for television and radio in particular, including, where possible, audio-visual coverage of United Nations activities in major international developments in which the Organization is a principal player. The shift to such programming will inevitably reduce production of those non-mandated taped television and radio programmes for which demand has diminished.

17. At the same time, with its rapidly developing capabilities to adapt technological advances to its multifaceted communications activities, the Department, by means of the Internet and related technologies, will further broaden the reach of its coverage materials in print, both by means of press releases and other publications, and through the newly established United Nations News Service. The News Service will serve as an important source for the world media and will disseminate news to editors worldwide throughout the day via electronic mail and facsimile. To be more effectively included in the 24-hour global news cycle, United Nations Offices in Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, and possibly peacekeeping missions and regional commissions, will be integrated into the news-writing mechanism.

18. While the media is the principal audience for this subprogramme, the vast and increasingly influential audience of non-governmental organizations and academic research and other influential institutions will also be able to receive directly, through electronic mail and the Internet in particular, news and other information materials from the United Nations.

19. Another objective of the subprogramme is the preparation of United Nations Television for the mandatory changeover from the NTSC format to the new digital television standard, which represents both a technological and a programming challenge. While the process of adapting from the television analog system to the digital standard has its financial implications in terms of capital investment in production equipment upgrade, the potential benefits for the effective dissemination of visual information are enormous. Digital television is expected to be fully available by the year 2006, when the transition period to phase-out the analog system ends.

20. A final objective of this subprogramme is to continue to develop the capacity for United Nations Radio to have its outputs more immediately available for use by the mass media. Radio remains one of the most cost-effective and far-reaching media available to the Organization for the dissemination of information, given the widespread availability of this medium in literally every corner of the globe. The development of new communications technologies, such as Web casting on the Internet, digital audio broadcasting, satellite distribution and direct satellite broadcasting, offer vast opportunities for more effectively widening the reach of United Nations Radio. This reach, especially through direct broadcasting, is particularly important for the support of peacekeeping operations.

V. Subprogramme 3. Library services

21. The purpose of this subprogramme is to provide information services (including ready reference, research, bibliographic control, Internet services and training) to delegations, Secretariat staff, researchers and depository libraries worldwide and to maintain, preserve and make available an archival collection of United Nations documents, publications and oral history tapes and transcripts. Library services will become increasingly global in nature and for effective outreach to a global audience, increasingly electronic and multilingual. The subprogramme is carried out by the Library and Information Resources Division and the network of United Nations information centres and services.

22. The major objective of the subprogramme is to facilitate access to and use of library services. This will be achieved through the supply of bibliographic and factual information about the Organization and its work by expanding innovative services that deliver customized time or mission critical information directly to the users' desktops. Additionally, usage will be increased by offering delegations, Secretariat staff, reference assistants, information assistants and depository librarians a range of general and customized training programmes that will enable them to take full advantage of new services. Access to commercially available electronic information services will be made increasingly cost-effective through the consortium of organizations of the United Nations system to maximize their collective buying power. This will allow the addition of databases from worldwide sources in all official languages.

23. The second objective of the subprogramme will be to increase the capacity of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library through networking with other libraries. The United Nations Depository Libraries, over 350 in number, will be further developed into effective channels of communication with civil society throughout the world. Regular two-way electronic communication will grow, permitting speedy information dissemination and regular feedback from target audiences. Electronic document delivery to depository libraries, where feasible, will be promoted to ensure rapid, complete and cost-effective documents distribution. The network of United Nations libraries sharing indexing and preservation of United Nations documents will also continue to grow.

24. The third objective will be continued improvement of in-house production and processing of data, including updated standards and guidelines for bibliographic control. This will include issuance of multilingual reference tools in all formats, print and electronic, and the continuous updating of indexing terminology in the six official languages. Further, the programme to convert older United Nations documents in all languages from microfiche and paper to digital format for uploading to the Optical Disk System and the United Nations Web site will continue.

25. The fourth objective will be to continue to maintain the Library's Web page as an outstanding source of United Nations information worldwide. The Web page will be continuously enriched with tools providing guidance in the use of documentary sources, while the major database, the United Nations Bibliographic Information System, will also

use the Internet as its main platform for public dissemination. The Library's Web page will be developed to the maximum extent possible in all six official languages, with multilingual retrieval capabilities.

26. The fifth objective will be to make the libraries of the United Nations information centres efficient and user-friendly centres for reference and information about the United Nations system, employing the latest information storage, retrieval and communications system. The libraries of the United Nations information centres will also provide opportunities for the public to benefit from the use of modern technologies that might otherwise not be widely accessible in certain countries, to access the United Nations Web site and other United Nations-related electronic information sources.

VI. Subprogramme 4. Publication services

27. The Library and Information Resources Division is responsible for implementing this subprogramme. The client-oriented sections of the Division, including the Graphic Design and Production Coordination Sections, will be important partners of the offices and departments throughout the Organization and will continue to make use of improvements in modern technology and internal reproduction facilities to achieve timely, attractive and cost-effective products.

28. The major objective of this subprogramme will be to focus on the production of authoritative, fact-based high-quality publications in a timely manner and to enhance their editorial and visual appeal to effectively broaden and strengthen support for the Organization through knowledge and understanding of its activities. In concert with the increasing use of the new media, authoritative publications continue to have a broad and long-term impact on opinion and policy and remain at the centre of publication services.

29. The second objective relates to the continued provision of high-quality information products on the Internet, aimed at increasing their audience and creating a new potential reader base for the Department's established publications. The Web pages of both *Africa Recovery* and the *UN Chronicle* have generated enormous visitor enthusiasm and interest in the parent publications; the availability of the *Yearbook of the United Nations* on CD-ROM will accelerate its accessibility to individuals as well as to institutions interested in the work of the Organization.

30. The third objective of the subprogramme will be the use of the Cartographic Section as a technology driven service, which will markedly increase the number and type of available products and the speed by which they are distributed. Large Geographic Information System databases will continue to be developed at the national and local levels. Capabilities to access and exchange such files will be strengthened. The Section will also assist substantive offices to work with the Geographic Information System and other map-related data. The standard United Nations geographic databases will be updated on an ongoing basis and shared system-wide. Web server technology will be used as the engine to distribute map reference information and cartographic and Geographic Information System products to substantive offices throughout the Organization, as well as to the general public.

31. The fourth objective of the subprogramme will be the Department's continuing role as chair of the Publications Board, which presents additional opportunities to enhance the publication process within the Secretariat, as well as to minimize duplication.